

Willamette Falls Lock
Chamber No. 1
West Linn, Oregon
Clackamas County

HAER No. OR-1

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

WILLAMETTE FALLS LOCKS

HAER No. OR-1

Location: Located between Willamette River miles 26 and 27 (and 12 miles south of Portland) in the town of West Linn, Clackamas County, Oregon.

Oregon City, Oregon, quadrangle

Date of Construction: 1873. Maintenance repairs 1962-1980.

Present Owner: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Portland District
P.O. Box 2946
Portland, OR 97208

Present Use: Navigational locks.

Significance: Willamette Falls Locks permitted river traffic to avoid the navigational hazards of Willamette Falls and Clackamas Rapids (as well as the expense of portage) and allowed for successful competition with railroad transportation so as to lower freight rates. Such competition was particularly critical to the burgeoning agricultural center lying to the south in the Willamette Valley.

Archeologist/Historian: Robert A. Freed, January 1981

Transmitted By: Monica E. Hawley, Historian, 1983

The Willamette Falls Locks were constructed in the later half of the 19th Century to satisfy the growing demand of shipping on the Willamette River. Before the locks were built, Willamette Falls and the Clackamas Rapids caused hazardous navigation and resulted in expensive portages of river traffic. Farming and shipping interests were especially concerned in reducing the cost of transportation from the growing agricultural center in the Willamette Valley to Portland. The increasing use of steamships also added to the feasibility of the locks.

On New Years Day 1873, the locks opened and are still operating today. Although the Willamette Falls Locks were not a successful financial venture from tolls, they enabled shipping on the Willamette River to compete with the railroad. This competition resulted in lowering freight rates by about half. In addition, the massive stone-work reflects the construction methods before concrete technology developed to its present use.

Since their opening, the locks changed ownership several times until they were purchased by the Federal Government in 1913 and are now operated by the Corps of Engineers. Average annual traffic exceeds one million tons over the last ten years. Most of the use is attributed to the movement of rafted logs; however, other forms of commerce and pleasure craft account for considerable use at no expense to traffic.

The planning, construction, and use of the locks spans a dynamic period in history when river navigation served as a primary "lifeline". While the locks became a key link to facilitating transportation between Portland and the agricultural area to the south in the Willamette Valley, it also successfully competed with the railroad resulting in the reduction of

transportation rates. Benefiting from this competition were the farming, shipping, and burgeoning steamship businesses. Therefore, the significance of Willamette Falls Locks lies in its relationship to commerce, engineering, and transportation.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

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